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Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Global Fund for Widows, Graduate Women International (GWI), Gray Panthers, HelpAge International, International Council of Women, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Make Mothers Matter, Mama Zimbi Foundation, National Alliance of Women's Organizations, Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) Limited, Tandem Project, The Widows Rights International, Widows for Peace through Democracy and Women for Human Rights, single women group, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Women for Human Rights, single women group (WHR) and the undersigned international and national non-governmental organisations in consultative status with ECOSOC, present for consideration by participants of the 63rd session of the United Nations (Commission on the Status of Women 63) the following statement:

Social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure has profound significance for widows of all ages, who in many countries are the poorest of the poor, and lack identification or support. Widows – young women, girls, and older women – are most in need of, but least able to access, social protection, pensions and other essential services that could ensure a decent life, and protect them and their children from extreme poverty, homelessness, marginalisation and violence.

In most countries and especially poorer countries, social protection systems give little or no consideration for widows. Very few widows receive a pension of any sort. There is overall a lack of firm data on widowhood, which will compromise implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals unless greater priority is given to the issue. This is very serious, given that, according to current estimates, which are likely to be an underestimate, there are more than 300 million widows worldwide, with 115 million living in extreme and chronic poverty.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to act to recognise the rights of widows to social protection, including pensions; to public services, including education and health; to recognition before the law and access to justice; and to shelter and housing. This 63rd Session provides an important opportunity to draw attention to widows' need for social protection in the form of pensions and basic income, which could do much to alleviate the poverty and misery which widows experience.

Widowhood, poverty, and access to pensions

Widowhood is a root cause of poverty across the generations, disadvantaging widows themselves and the children they have to feed, educate and care for – over 500 million children worldwide. All, irrespective of age, ethnicities, caste or class, have rights to social protection, security, and protection.

In developed countries, universal state pension systems cover most older widows, but very few middle and low-income countries and fragile conflict-affected states have systems of universal pensions, social protection and safety nets that could ensure widows of all ages a measure of income security.

Much of the literature and research on widowhood and pensions focuses on older widows. Access to social protection of younger bereaved women and girls is not well documented. This is a significant gap in evidence given that worldwide an estimated 10 per cent of women of marital age – who can be as young as 10 years old – are widows.

Widows in conflict-affected and developing countries lack access to the social protection of any sort. Millions live in extreme poverty and struggle to support themselves and their families. Informal and family systems of support are extremely unreliable and often harmful, with widows subject to exploitation, sexual abuse, and exclusion. Deceased husbands' property is very often appropriated by male relatives.

Harmful traditional practices expose widows to multiple acts of violence wherever they are. They can be exploited as secluded modern-day domestic, agricultural or sexual slaves, chased from the family plot of land and coerced into begging and prostitution in the community. Those who do this are often members of the dead husband's family.

Patriarchal attitudes to widowhood at many levels of decision-making deny widowed women and girls impartial justice to recover their rightful property, or defend themselves against such mourning and burial rites as "widow-inheritance, leverite and ritual cleansing".

Extreme poverty also fuels early marriage, since impoverished widows are unable to keep their daughters in school. Consequently, daughters are often given, sold, or trafficked to much older men, creating ever more child widows.

Effective social protection mechanisms, access to services and to legal protections could go some way to eliminate dangerous survival measures and violations of the right of widows.

Pensions

The majority of state pension systems depend on contributions from those working in the formal sector. Most women in developing countries, however, work in the informal sector and have no such provision. In the few developing countries that have instituted pensions for widows, eligibility may only start at ages over 50, thus leaving the many younger widows without any support.

The procedures for applying for state pensions disadvantage widows, especially younger illiterate rural widows, because they depend on formal documentation, birth, marriage and death certificates which they do not have nor support to obtain. Long and expensive distances to government offices, the inability to fill up forms, and the problems of communicating with strangers outside their villages deter many from seeking these benefits.

Data

The biggest barrier to widows accessing social support, benefits, and services in the absence of data on their numbers, ages, lifestyles, needs, roles, informal support systems and coping survival strategies. The injustices which consign millions of widows to poverty and exclusion cannot be tackled without better data on their lives, qualitative as well as quantitative. The data gap does not have to be addressed by means of expensive surveys – desirable as these may be – but can be filled, at least to begin with, by alternative methodologies involving the widows themselves, as best practice in mapping and profiling of widows in Nepal has demonstrated.

In India, one of the few developing countries with a universal pension scheme, the sums involved are so derisory that widows, even if aware of these benefits, may find it not worth the time and effort to navigate the bureaucracy and documentation needed to access them. Often, relying on male relatives to undertake the task of accessing the pension, widows find that it is they who end up receiving the pension. In Iraq, widows who are entitled to a pension, small though it may be, must be registered. In that country's years of uncertainty and violence, however, few widows have registered and even fewer receive pensions.

Non-governmental organizations and paralegals can facilitate access to state services and assist with documentation to ensure widows get the benefits they are entitled to. Non-governmental organizations, such as Women for Human Rights Single Women's Group in Nepal (WHR), the Self-Employed Women's Association in India (SEWA) Guild of Service in India (GoS), and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh, have demonstrated "best practice" in securing widows', health care, scholarships for their children's education, legal aid, funeral expenses and life insurance. Their work has seen a decline in widows begging, daughters withdrawn from school for early marriage, and in prostitution. While widows in many countries may be dependent on non-governmental

organizations to support them, most success in accessing their rights comes when they are helped to establish their own organisations, as in Nepal and in Kenya where respectively the Women for Human Rights Single Women's Group (WHR) and the Ronan Foundation for Widows and Orphans ensure widows' voices are heard at decision-making committees so as to influence policies that can address their needs.

Conclusions and recommendations

The United Nations, its Member States, and the international community generally are urged to pay urgent attention to ensuring widows' rights to social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure, and for widows of all ages to be seen, counted and heard. Such action is essential for the achievement of all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

It is recommended that this Commission support

- A General Recommendation to States Parties on widowhood, which will ensure progress on access of widows to their right to social protection and to basic services, and that penal laws criminalise all harmful traditional practices.
- The visibility and encouragement for widows and their organisations to allow them to articulate their needs, be engaged in consultations relating to service delivery and in law reforms and their implementation.
- Concrete actions to fill the evidence gap on data on widows using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and the work of widows to document their situations.